

Deconstructing the Politics of Linguistic Mutation in Tom Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*

Tom Stoppard'ın *Dogg's Hamlet* ve *Cahoot's Macbeth* Adlı Oyunlarında Dilsel Mutasyon Politikasının Yapısökümü

ABSTRACT

Tom Stoppard's theatrical works, *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoot's Macbeth*, serve as a significant exemplification of linguistic and political power dynamics. These plays represent a transformative shift that depicts the workings of hegemony in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War era. Stoppard, a Czechoslovakian native, crafted these satirical works in response to the brutal persecution of critical intellectuals and censorship of their dissident works. The plays voice the intellectual restlessness of the time, resisting the status quo, and illustrating the tensions that led to the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Stoppard's innovative linguistic experimentation transforms Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, into an entirely novel linguistic system, named "Doggspeak," which derives inspiration from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. This new linguistic transformation acts as a catalyst for social and political change, resisting surveillance and censorship of free speech. Stoppard's plays, therefore, use language to alter power relations, creating space for political defiance. This paper delves into two key questions: How does Stoppard modify language in the dramatic setting, and how does this linguistic transformation shift power relations within the plays? By creating a new linguistic system, Stoppard outmanoeuvres oppressors and wittingly turns language into an instrument for political rebellion. He stages a truncated, mutant version of Shakespeare's plays where they are banned, giving voice to the intellectual restlessness of Czechoslovakia in the 1970s. Stoppard's plays posit that language is not merely a tool for communication, but also a vehicle for social and political transformation. Through linguistic mutation, Stoppard subverts the existing power structures and challenges the hegemony of the oppressors. This essay argues that Stoppard's plays showcase the crucial significance of language in the struggle for political and social change, emphasizing the crucial role that language plays in shaping our perceptions and understanding of the world.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Stoppard, Wittgenstein, Censorship, Linguistic Mutation

ÖZ

Tom Stoppard'ın tiyatro eserleri, *Dogg's Hamlet* ve *Cahoot's Macbeth*, dilsel ve politik güç dinamiklerinin önemli bir örneğini sunar. Bu oyunlar, Soğuk Savaş döneminde Çekoslovakya'daki hegemonyanın işleyişini tasvir eden dönüştürücü bir değişimi temsil eder. Çekoslovakyalı olan Stoppard, bu hicivsel eserleri, eleştirel entelektüellerin acımasız bir şekilde zulme, muhalif eserlerinin ise sansüre uğradığı bir döneme yanıt olarak kaleme almıştır. Oyunlar, dönemin entelektüel huzursuzluğunu dile getirmekte, statükoya direnmekte ve 1989 Kadife Devrimi'ne yol açan gerilimleri göstermektedir. Stoppard'ın dilde yenilikçi deneyselliği, Shakespeare'in *Hamlet* ve *Macbeth* oyunlarını, Ludwig Wittgenstein'in *Felsefi Soruşturmalar*'ından esinlenen "Doggspeak" adlı tamamen yeni bir dilsel sisteme dönüştürür. Bu yeni dilsel dönüşüm, sosyal ve politik değişim için bir katalizör görevi görür, gözetime ve ifade özgürlüğünün sansürlenmesine direnir. Stoppard'ın oyunları, bu nedenle, dili güç ilişkilerini değiştirmek için kullanır ve politik meydan okuma için alan yaratır. Bu makale iki temel soruyu araştırmaktadır: Stoppard dramatik ortamda dili nasıl değiştirir ve bu dilsel dönüşüm oyunlardaki güç ilişkilerini nasıl değiştirir? Stoppard yeni bir dilsel sistem yaratarak baskıcıları alt eder ve dili bilinçli bir şekilde politik bir başkaldırı aracına dönüştürür. Shakespeare'in oyunlarının kısıtlanmış, mutant bir versiyonunu yasaklandıkları yerde sahneleyerek 1970'lerde Çekoslovakya'nın entelektüel huzursuzluğuna ses verir. Stoppard'ın oyunları, dilin yalnızca bir iletişim aracı değil, aynı zamanda sosyal ve politik dönüşüm için de bir araç olduğunu ortaya koyar. O, dilsel mutasyon yoluyla mevcut iktidar yapılarını altüst eder ve ezenlerin hegemonyasına meydan okur. Bu makale, Stoppard'ın oyunlarının politik ve sosyal değişim mücadelesinde dilin hayati önemini sergilediğini, dilin dünyayı algılayışımızı ve kavrayışımızı şekillendirmede oynadığı hayati rolü vurguladığını savunmaktadır.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Shakespeare, Stoppard, Wittgenstein, Sansür, Dilsel Mutasyon

Introduction

Tom Stoppard is a self-proclaimed introspective writer. He would write his plays with a fountain pen and read them into a cassette recorder while playing all the roles and improvising stage directions. The manuscript remains under constant revision as Stoppard keeps polishing his texts, undergoing mutations and transmutations before and even after being rehearsed and performed on stage. This reflective and self-critical approach to writing is quintessential to the creation of Stoppard's time-bending dramatic art. In fact, earlier versions of his plays are a testament to the evolution of his linguistic prowess and intellectual inquisitiveness. Although the end product often implicates an adroit use of language, Stoppard is not only celebrated for crafting intricate and stimulating dialogues but for intersecting art and reality and communicating topical struggles through humor and wit that are "as fresh today as when they were written" (Gussow, 1984). In *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*, he perpetuates the anti-totalitarian ethos that governs both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* while carrying on the legacy of word invention. Unlike his more famously-known debut play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) which is steeped in Beckettian paralysis, this overtly political ensemble joins amusement with instruction and clads Shakespeare in dissident comedy. In the present article, I elucidate how Stoppard adapted Shakespeare to the context of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and how the two interconnected one-act plays destabilize the manipulative and indoctrinating practices of political authority. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates the crucial impact of artistic creation in the struggle for political and social change, emphasizing the pivotal role that language plays in promoting free expression and countering repressive and hegemonic regimes.

State Surveillance and the Rise of The Living Room Theatre

A Reality Czech

Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth explores the consequences of the freedom of expression behind the silent walls of Prague. The émigré background of Stoppard opened his eyes to the political scene of the period. His theatrical piece does not only express refusal but liberates itself from the constraints of conformity (Sammells, 1988, p. 89). *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* is a sardonic comment on Stalinism and its totalitarian structure of terror. That is why, it is essential to understand the major socio-political turbulences that led to the creation of the Stoppardian dissent comedy.

In 1981, Stoppard wrote an open letter to President Husák expressing his frustration and disappointment at the continuous refusal of his return VISA application to Czechoslovakia and the despicable indifference towards his numerous attempts to visit his friend Vaclav Havel. In the letter, he deplores the impossibility of communication and transparency on the part of the Czechoslovakian officials and writes: “The occupational prejudice of playwrights is that things only move forward with dialogue” (Stoppard, 1981, p. 18). Stoppard’s art dramatically changed from disdain of political involvement to commemoration of the dissenting voice.

Jindrich Chalupecký (2002), one of the formative Czech art historians and critics described Czechoslovakia as a place “of diverse and sophisticated culture” (p. 31) until its people were “presented with something incredibly barren, monotonous and base as to defy reason” (p. 31). Membership in organizations became compulsory. Demonstrating loyalty to the regime became a daily activity. There was no time for private thought. In his book *Artificial Hell*, Bishop (2012) writes: “The ownership of private property was systematically eliminated, along with privacy and individuality as an emotional and psychological refuge” (p. 131). In order to ensure its dominance, the repressive regime boosted its state surveillance through artistic censorship. Indeed, theatrical performances were banned by the Communist authorities. It was perceived as a subversive activity that undermined and even threatened the existing authorities.

Resistance through Performance and The Living Room Theatre

This act of demoralization and destruction of a long-standing cultural heritage was met by resistance from The Living Room Theatre idealized by Pavel Kohout who staged small and private performances of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in the apartment of the actress Vlasta Chramostova and also in the homes and country houses of other dissidents. In his article “Shakespeare and the Czech Resistance”, Procházka (1996) underscores the significance of these private shows. The critic insists that Kohout did not indulge in these risky performances because of the “strong tradition” of Shakespeare; he simply aimed at creating a “social bond” between the performers and the audience (p. 61). Due to the nature of the theatrical space, stage directions were read aloud, expressively, replacing bodily movements. Non-dramatic parts were omitted and so were some characters. Performers had to constantly change roles and reconstitute personal voices. Some passages were put to music performed by the banned singer Vlasta Tresnak which strengthened the bond against the system.

The emergence of the Living Room Theatre defied the government's panoptic system. It necessitates a gathering of a trusted audience which is not only prohibited but also highly risky because anyone could report back to the state. In fact, the state, as a modern hegemon, does not operate alone. In political science, hegemony starts at the level of the state but also infiltrates societal relations. Michel Foucault writes that any individual can exercise power and everyone can oversee and monitor as the state does. Power is thus "automatized" and "disindividualized" (Foucault, 1995, p. 202). Once it becomes the norm, the focus shifts to the self concealing all outward interaction. In a process of what Foucault calls 'individuation', the people become self-operating and start monitoring themselves. Hence, the end product is "a collection of separated individualities" (Foucault, 1995, p. 201) which eventually abolishes all hope of reunion and cultural exchange.

Shakespeare, Metamorphosed

What Stoppard manages to so creatively execute is to transform a literary canon such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to reprimand totalitarianism in a parodic fashion. He surpasses the bounds of the Czechoslovakian influences detailed above and exploits characters that exhibit misfit to promote serious reflection that leads to uncontested laughter. He revivifies characters from past tragedies and casts them anew into a disorderly present where they strut and fret upon the stage unaware of the heaviness of the message they carry.

In *Cahoot's Macbeth*, events take place in a living room in a flat in the Eastern Bloc city under police-state control. A version of *Macbeth* is being performed by Cahoot's troupe. An inspector interferes. He warns the performers that their activities can be provocative to the authorities. He then leaves after the coronation of Macbeth, the tyrant, which he takes to be a happy ending. In *Cahoot's Macbeth*, characters from *Dogg's Hamlet* appear. In the latter, a group of students, who are under the tutelage of Professor Dogg, are rehearsing *Hamlet*. When they are busy preparing the stage, they communicate in Dogg Language only: it is a language composed of English words that have completely different interpretations. This method is derived from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. It was appealing for Stoppard because it presented the possibility of writing a play which had to teach the audience the language in which the play was written. Rank (2010) writes that *Cahoot's Macbeth* offers "a lesson on free expression under difficult circumstances" (p. 171) and so the use of a new language breaks the shackles on

communication imposed by the regime. Filicia Londré (2001) asserts that “artists under a totalitarian regime are physically walled in”, adding that “their thoughts and creative imaginations will always find some form of expression – a whole new language if necessary” (p. 319).

Performing Shakespeare in the Eastern Bloc is overtly anti-system. In Stoppard’s play, the inspector declares: “Shakespeare- or the Old Bill, as we call him in the force- is not a popular choice with my chief, owing to his popularity with the public, or as we call it in the force, the filth” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 192). What is popular with the public becomes unpopular with the state. In his book *Keywords*, Raymond Williams (1976) explains that hegemony is not only the ruling of one predominant class but the acceptance of this class as the norm and the common sense. So, hegemony feeds on the consent of the submissive with power being in the hands of the dominant class. The dominant class in this context is the one-party system in Czechoslovakia and it is hence the locus of hegemony. What Stoppard’s play does is that it breaks the chain of submission by fiercely engaging in the outlawed activity of theatre. It becomes even more dreadful when the players kindle the spirit of Shakespeare and invite their trusted audience to watch. The consequences are absolutely dire. “Jobs lost, children failing exams, letters undelivered, driving licences withdrawn, passports indefinitely postponed” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 192).

The Inspector knows that these dramatic works may give rise to unwanted and dangerous intellectual spur. He says: “The fact is, when you get a universal and timeless writer like Shakespeare there’s a strong feeling that he could be spitting in the eyes of the beholder when he should be keeping his mind on Verona” (p. 192). Right here, is an accusation of defiance; yet for the Inspector, it has not broken out yet. He needs personal action that is not clad in Shakespearean characters. He admits:

The chief says he’d rather you stood up and said ‘there’s no freedom in this country’, then there’s nothing underhand and we all know where we stand. You get your lads together and we get our lads together and when it’s all over, one of us is in power and you’re in gaol. That’s freedom in action. (p. 192)

The Inspector’s use of the word ‘freedom’ is farcical. Freedom in action would be an actual proof of state defiance. To stand up and say there is no freedom is a free ticket to life in shackles. The Living Room Theatre was not meant to be safe. It was meant to combat the system from within by widening the circle of dissidents.

Outside the living room, the players cannot risk being recognized as intellectuals or artists

because the system would simply annihilate them. For instance, the performer in the role of Macbeth used to sweep floors, and before that, he used to be a night watchman and before that a trolley porter. Now he works at a kiosk at a tram terminus; but originally, he is an actor named Landovsky (Stoppard fashions this character after Pavel Landovsky the famous Czechoslovak actor who was banned from acting in public). These not-so-much-of-career stages were marked by constant surveillance and so the Inspector remembers Landovsky from the outside world where he has no defiant voice whatsoever but, more dangerously, he remembers him for his role as a button-molder in the Norwegian play “Peer Gynt”. Although Landovsky insists that he has not worked for years, the Inspector reminds him of his omnipresence. He says “I’m the cream in your coffee, the sugar in your tank, and the breeze blowing down your neck” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 188). Then, he reveals that he enjoyed Landovsky’s former performances and asks for his autograph which he claims is for his daughter. Deceitful and manipulative, he strives to get hold of a proof that Landovsky still exists as an actor which is incriminating. At that point and if not careful, almost anything anyone says could be held against them. The Inspector, being the vocal advocate of the state, says “I must warn you that anything you say will be taken down and played back at your trial” (p. 206). His language is both hostile and threatening. As he approaches Landovsky, he says:

You’d better get rid of the idea that there’s a special Macbeth which you do when I’m not around and some other Macbeth for when I am around which isn’t worth doing. You’ve only got one Macbeth. It’s what we call a one-party system. (p. 188)

The linguistic hegemony here empowers the one-party state and disarms the artist.

“If it’s not Free Expression!”: Weaponising Doggspeak to Alter Power Relations

The Inspector comes back to the flat when Act Five is about to begin. It coincides with the presence of a lorry driver called Easy who comes to deliver building materials. Easy does not belong to the circle of intellectuals yet he possesses the ultimate tool to neutralize the domineering presence of the state embodied by the Inspector. He cannot understand English and speaks Dogg, a playful language invented by Stoppard whereby English words are stripped of their original definitions and acquire new meanings. For instance, ‘what’ means ‘eleven’, ‘plank’ means ‘ready’ and “gymshoes” means “excellent”. When the Inspector asks, “Where did you learn it?” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 206), the hostess responds that Dogg language cannot be instructed but rather caught. What follows is the enactment of Act Five of *Macbeth* in Dogg language. Therefore, English, the

common linguistic medium that the Inspector understands and expects to hear completely disappears from the performance. This supposedly predominant language is replaced with an alternate, funny-sounding, linguistic innovation that the players quickly catch and it does not seem to bother anyone in the audience but the Inspector. He is dazzled and confused; but is unable to decode what the Actors are saying. He suspects it to be an act of “hostility towards the Republic” (p. 207) but cannot possibly condemn any mischief or anti-state incitement. He says through the phone, “How the hell do I know? But if it is not free expression, I don’t know what is” (p. 207).

The last act the Inspector witnesses is the crowning of a tyrant which he joyfully lauds. He does not comprehend the last scene which entails the killing of Macbeth, the usurper and the crowning of Malcolm in his stead after receiving the support of his people. In other words, the performance is concluded with the rule of legitimacy and justice over tyrannical violence which is a flagrant act of animosity towards the status quo. Had he decoded the language, the Inspector would have unquestionably ordered the arrest of the troupe which he keeps threatening all night long. In this context, hegemony resides in the dominant language and tumbles down upon the persistence of another. The diffusion of Dogg language shifts the paradigm of power relations within the living room whereby the Inspector is the incarnation of the sovereign state to which the players are expected to submit. Submission here is understood in terms of compliance with the dominant culture that is being actively propagated notably in terms of linguistic conformity and artistic silence.

Doggspeak is employed by the artists as a form of free expression that defies censorship. It is reminiscent of George Orwell’s Newspeak, the official language of Oceania, the totalitarian superstate in *1984*. Only Doggspeak is used to diminish the range of state control thus becoming a form of resistance against the panoptic system and its mechanisms of power. Rather than internalizing the surveillance and disciplinary gaze of the inspector, the characters employ a language that grants them agency and enables them to evade his control.

Dogg language is not restricted to everyday jargon but can be used in performing a Shakespearean play. The infamous soliloquy of Macbeth in Act V, Scene 5, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time . . .” (Shakespeare, 2010, p. 211) is translated into “Dominoes, et dominoes, et dominoes, Popsies historical axle-grease, exacts bubbly fins crock lavender” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 209). In the

ears of the Inspector, they are regular English words that cannot possibly formulate a meaning because of their seemingly chaotic structure. Dogg language becomes the ultimate *coup de théâtre* that allows for the show to go on and for the final scene to take place without the interference of an inspective force. In using Dogg language, the players are the ones who are redefining reality and reshaping consciousness after long being victims of social and economic domination.

Conclusion

Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth earned critical praise for adapting Shakespeare to the context of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. Much like *Macbeth*, it is fraught with overriding ambitions, totalitarian violence but most relevantly resistance against the establishment. The play stems from the borderland of *Macbeth* to destabilize the manipulative and indoctrinating practices of political authority. In these two interlocked plays, Stoppard first reduces *Hamlet* into a fifteen-minute play that is further abridged into a two-minute 'ENCORE'. In the second one, *Macbeth* does not exactly undergo the same condensation as most of it is played straight; but it is still shortened following the fashion of the underground Living-Room Theatre. These metamorphosed plays and metaplays are highly important and central to the dramatic peculiarity of Stoppard. Although he does not talk about being an engaged writer nor does he admit to having any particular conviction or social objective other than the love of writing, his confession in an interview with Philip Roberts in 1978 is quite suggestive: "There is no such thing as pure art- art is a commentary on something else in life (...) art ought to involve itself in contemporary social and political history as much as anything else" (p. 84). Eventually, through linguistic experimentation and thematic cross-pollination, Stoppard allows his palimpsestic writing to be metamorphosed from a purely selective textual transfer or a theatrical reproduction of Shakespeare into a linguistic reconfiguration of an iconic work of drama that topples a self-praising, ostensibly triumphant yet profoundly paranoiac tyrannical system within the small walls of an Eastern Bloc living room.

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